



# **Civil War Senator: William Pitt Fessenden and the Fight to Save the American Republic (Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War)**

*Robert J. Cook*

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## **Civil War Senator: William Pitt Fessenden and the Fight to Save the American Republic (Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War)** Robert J. Cook

One of the most talented and influential American politicians of the nineteenth century, William Pitt Fessenden (1806-1869) helped devise Union grand strategy during the Civil War. A native of Maine and son of a fiery New England abolitionist, he served in the United States Senate as a member of the Whig Party during the Kansas-Nebraska crisis and played a formative role in the development of the Republican Party. In this richly textured and fast-paced biography, Robert J. Cook charts Fessenden's rise to power and probes the potent mix of political ambition and republican ideology which impelled him to seek a place in the U.S. Senate at a time of rising tension between North and South. A determined and self-disciplined man who fought, not always successfully, to keep his passions in check, Fessenden helped to spearhead Republican party opposition to proslavery expansion during the strife-torn 1850s and led others to resist the cotton states' efforts to secede peaceably after the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. During the Civil War, he chaired the Senate Finance Committee and served as President Lincoln's second head of the Treasury Department. In both positions, he fashioned and implemented wartime financial policy for the United States. In addition, Fessenden's multifaceted relationship with Lincoln helped to foster effective working relations between the president and congressional Republicans. Cook outlines Fessenden's many contributions to critical aspects of northern grand strategy and to the gradual shift to an effective total war policy against the Confederacy. Most notably, Cook shows, Fessenden helped craft congressional policy regarding the confiscation and emancipation of slaves. Cook also details Fessenden's tenure as chairman of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction after the war, during which he authored that committee's report. Although he sanctioned his party's break with Andrew Johnson less than a year after the war's end, Cook explains how Fessenden worked decisively to thwart attempts by Radical Republicans to revolutionize post-emancipation society in the defeated Confederacy. The first biography of Fessenden in over forty years, *Civil War Senator* reveals a significant but often sidelined historical figure and explains the central role played by party politics and partisanship in the coming of the Civil War, northern military victory, and the ultimate failure of postwar Reconstruction. Cook restores Fessenden to his place as one of the most important politicians of a troubled generation.

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